

# **Their Legacy, Our Heritage**

## **The Coast Guard and the War of 1812**

### **Part I of VI**



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During the next few months, we will send what I hope will be informative, brief articles about action by Revenue Cutter crews during the War of 1812 to help you better understand how this ancestor of the modern-day Coast Guard employed the Principles of Coast Guard Operations detailed in Coast Guard Publication 1, and to pass along some great (and true) Coast Guard sea stories.

Before jumping into tales of valor and bravery, some context may be helpful. In the years leading up to the War of 1812, Great Britain routinely violated American sovereignty and neutrality on the high seas, and they made every effort to block U.S. trade with France, since the Napoleonic Wars were at their peak in Europe, and Great Britain and France were enemies. Great Britain boarded U.S. merchant vessels, seized cargoes, and took the extra step of forcing U.S. merchantmen to serve aboard British naval vessels and privateers, often claiming they were escaped subjects of the Crown. So, between 1806 and 1812, the administrations of Presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, and Congress tried to assert U.S. neutrality and bolster the regulated flow of cargoes at sea by passing various laws . . . but they rarely achieved the desired effect. Great Britain continued to do as they pleased, and some of the U.S. merchantmen/business partners did their best avoid compliance with U.S. trade laws, with names such as: Non-Importation Act of 1806, Embargo Acts of 1807-08, Enforcement Act of 1809, and a ninety-day embargo in April 1812. The Revenue Cutter crews were required to board, inspect, and seize non-compliant merchant vessels, and some of these laws were very unpopular with American businessmen, because the cutter crews were cutting into their business bottom line. By June 1812, President Madison had enough and chose to declare war against Great Britain. Madison was responding to British encroachments on American honor and maritime rights. He intended to end the influence of the British among their Indian allies, whose resistance blocked United States settlement in the Midwest.

At some point, early in your career, you probably memorized the verses and chorus of Semper Paratus, the official Coast Guard anthem. Verse two speaks to some of the gallantry of the U. S. Revenue Cutter Service (USRCS) during the War of 1812...

“SURVEYOR and NARCISSUS, the EAGLE and DISPATCH,  
The HUDSON and the TAMPA, the names are hard to match;  
From Barrow’s shores to Paraguay, Great Lakes or ocean wave,  
The Coast Guard fought through storms and waves to punish or to save.”

SURVEYOR and EAGLE were two of the fourteen revenue cutters employed by the USRCS during the War of 1812, and the song highlights battles against the British ships NARCISSUS and DISPATCH. I wouldn’t describe either of these battles as great victories, but they did demonstrate the revenue cutters crews’ on-scene initiative, flexibility, and unity of effort...all modern-day Principles of Coast Guard Operations. Here is a quick summary of each confrontation:

On a foggy night in June 1813, Revenue Cutter SURVEYOR was at anchor five miles upriver from the mouth of the York River in Chesapeake Bay. Captain Samuel Travis knew that the enemy was nearby, so the deck guns were loaded and ready. The crew of HMS NARCISSUS was also ready, and they chose to use their barges to sneak up to SURVEYOR and board her. This caught the crew by surprise, but they were ready to respond with two muskets apiece, and they fought gallantly. From Kensil Bell’s 1943 edition of Always Ready: “How well the cuttermen contested the SURVEYOR’s deck with pistol and cutlass can be judged by the return of Captain Travis’ sword to him the next day with this note from the senior officer of HMS NARCISSUS: ‘Your gallant and desparate attempt to defend your vessel against more than double your number, on the night of the 12 inst. [sic], excited such admiration on the part of your opponents, as I have seldom witnessed, and induces me to return your sword you had so nobly used...I am at a loss which to admire most, the arrangement on board the SURVEYOR, or the determined manner by which her deck was disputed, inch by inch.’”

Another great story was captured in a painting by Coast Guard Bicentennial artist Dean Ellis: “The Defeat of the Privateer DART.” You may recall seeing artwork of a nighttime engagement between two sailing ships under a full moon with a pair of windmills on a rocky cliff in the background. That painting artfully showed Revenue Cutter VIGILANT firing on the British privateer DART. It is still one of my favorite paintings from the Coast Guard Bicentennial art collection. The setting for that engagement was offshore of Block Island, Rhode Island. From the Bicentennial art brochure: “The capture of the DART was one of the most impressive captures by a revenue cutter. The British privateer DART, formerly an American vessel out of New Haven, Connecticut had successfully cruised along the coast and captured between twenty and thirty small American merchant ships. Late on October 4, 1813, the captain of the privateer mistakenly appeared at Newport with two prizes. To put an end to the foray, Captain John Cahoone offered the services of the revenue cutter VIGILANT. Placing extra men on board, Cahoone immediately set sail after sunset and located the sloop off the east end of Block Island. The VIGILANT fired one broadside and then boarded DART. During the fight, the first officer of DART was killed and two crewmen were wounded.”

Late in the summer of 1814, Revenue Cutter EAGLE set sail from New Haven, hoping to find and seize the British privateer SUSAN. They sailed through the night, and at dawn, with fog on the near horizon, they lost the wind but were in sight of SUSAN when the 18-gun brig HMS DISPATCH came out of the fog bank under full sail. Plan "B" for Captain Frederick Lee included lowering two small boats and attempting to row/tow EAGLE to a better position to defend against attack by DISPATCH. It was too late, so Captain Lee chose to beach EAGLE under a high bluff on the north shore of Long Island. DISPATCH fired upon EAGLE, damaging her masts and deck equipment. The cuttermen remained at their battle stations, returning fire through the night and into the next morning. Captain Lee then ordered some of the deck guns dismantled, taken ashore, and moved up to the bluff to enable them to fire down onto DISPATCH. Local militia joined in the fight and only after every round of ammunition was exhausted was EAGLE seized. We read in Kensil Bell's 1943 edition of Always Ready: "With all this, the British finally took the EAGLE. But only after they had retired and waited for the cuttermen to kedge her off the beach. Her capture became an easy matter then, as she limped alongshore under jury rig, hunting a place of safety."

The war finally came to an end several months later with the Treaty of Ghent. The crews of revenue cutters proved they could lay alongside an enemy, exchange gunfire, find victory, defend their decks, and sacrifice in service to their country.

We, the U.S. Coast Guard, carry with us today their many hard-fought lessons and examples. Today, may we stand our watch vigilantly, and with the courage and commitment demonstrated by our predecessors in the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service during the War of 1812. Trained initiative, leadership under fire, and adaptive responses to dangerous situations were evident in 1812 and are carried on again in 2012 on your watch.